

## **Highway 61 at 50**

**by Peter Stone Brown**

It was a bright sunny day, and I was walking with my brother on the main street of our town, a suburb of New York in northern New Jersey when I saw what looked like a new Bob Dylan album in the window of the record store across the street. We crossed the street and my eyes were not wrong. In the window was *Highway 61 Revisited*. We'd been away at camp all summer which ended just in time for Dylan's concert at Forest Hills, but we had no idea a new Dylan album was coming. *Bringing It All Back Home* was only five months old. Whatever else we intended for the day ended and we rushed home and spent the rest of the day and night absorbing the album.

Aside from "Like A Rolling Stone," which by this time had been a hit for over a month, we'd heard five of the nine songs two days before at Forest Hills though the contentious atmosphere at the show didn't necessarily allow for full appreciation, and now we had titles to go with the songs.

The sound was harder and tougher than *Bringing It All Back Home* and it quickly became clear that Dylan had taken the lyrics into new uncharted territory, combining symbolism with absurdity in a way that initially seemed incomprehensible, which was bolstered by the semi-comedic liner notes. We didn't stop to think about that most of the songs were based on blues, that would come later.

Immediately noticeable was the lead guitar of Mike Bloomfield. The riffs he played after each chorus of "Tombstone Blues" were like nothing we'd heard before.

It was almost to the day my 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary as a Bob Dylan fan, and considering how much he'd changed and grown in those two years, two this day one would be hard pressed to track similar growth in such a short period of time of any artist in any field. It was very clear Dylan was still writing about what was going on in the world, but the targets weren't as defined or simplistic. Topics like war and peace or civil rights weren't the main issue. Dylan was singing about the madness of society and the music and the lyrics matched that madness. Most of the songs displayed a healthy contempt for the conventions and institutions of society as well as authority and the rapid fire laser sharp tone of the lyrics knocked down one icon after another. Blink or get distracted and you missed it.

As hard and charged as the album was, there was also time for tenderness and sadness and beauty. It's all in Dylan's voice on "It Takes A Lot To Laugh, It Takes A Train To Cry" in a performance he's never come close to equaling. And while "Queen Jane Approximately" is in many ways a put down song, there's a lot of affection in those lyrics. And then there's "Just

Like Tom Thumb's Blues," on one level the ultimate song about being wasted, yet it's so much more than that, a song that would become explosive in concert, but on this version there's a sadness that pervades every verse echoed by Bloomfield's at times weeping guitar against Paul Griffin's piano. And then of course there's "Like A Rolling Stone," but the reason the lyrics work is the sadness about the person who's hit bottom.

The exploration of *Highway 61 Revisited* would continue for months and as it turned out years. "Desolation Row" still has new revelations that surface every now and then. How many songs can you say that about after listening for 50 years? But back then it was all new, the songs, the sound the musicians, many of them doing the greatest work they ever did in some cases almost by accident. But back then on that sunny August day, we knew we were listening to something great and something that would last. And that album got me through the coming school year. Have a crappy day, go home, put on *Highway 61 Revisited* and go somewhere else. I'm generally not one to talk in terms of best, but it might be the best album Bob Dylan recorded and it might also be the best album anyone recorded.